

Ecofeminism, Nascent Critical Approach: An Analysis of *Fire on the Mountain*

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Abstract

Understanding of the after effects of industrialization on ecological balance it is helpful to study human culture through a reunion of the theme of 'nature' as it is depicted in the works of different writers who write for nature; and thereby highlight the harmful effects of human alliance with nature. Anita Desai belongs to the genre of such writers who fits herself with the basic ideas of the environmentalists and ecologists. *Fire on the Mountain* publicises ecoawareness by acknowledging the landscape, by expressing human actions in animal terms, by representing to us the diverse nature of mountain biosphere and connecting them with various moods of feminist behaviour; and thus aims at achieving an integral relationship between woman and nature.

Keywords: Ecological, *Fire on the Mountain*, Ecofeminism

Introduction

Ecofeminism is a concept which has been in circulation for some time but is still at a nascent stage. A ecofeminist perspective would involve the coming together of ecocriticism and ecofeminism into one analytical focus, where it would be necessary to recognize that the

exploitation of nature and the oppression of women are intimately bound up with notions of class, caste, race, colonialism and neo-colonialism. In discourses of purity concerning environment literature and criticism, women as the colonized, have been “repeatedly naturalized as objects of heritage to be owned, preserved, or patronized rather than as subjects of their own land and legacies” [2]. It is important then to bring together feminism and environmental issues so that continuing imperialist modes and colonialist attitudes of social and environmental dominance can be challenged [3]. If we were to look at some of the postcolonial countries such as those in Africa and South Asia, particularly India, we realize that these nations have a history of environmental activism and movements even before ecofeminism emerged as an academic discipline in the Western world.

Women-led environmental activism and writing in India In India, the Chipko movement has gained iconic status and is now cited as a highly successful example of grassroots environmentalism in India. This movement is also key for the way in which it mobilised women. This movement brought about the concept of tree-hugging to stop activities such as deforestation, lumbering and mining. The movement originated in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand in Uttar Pradesh, India. The state's increasing commercialisation and underdevelopment of the Garhwal region was instrumental in the conceptualisation of this movement, where local women were affected by state-level decisions such as granting private contractors harvest rights for the trees to manufacture cricket bats. Due to excessive deforestation, the year 1970 saw its most devastating flood and equally destructive landslides.

Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* portray the darker shades of nature and the simultaneous conjunction of the darker aspects of the women concerned. She is free occupied with imaginary landscape of natural beauty, which propels her to draw solace and happiness

out of it in the midst of troubles, difficulties and heaviness of daily life. Nanda Kaul is the protagonist of Fire on the Mountain. She as an individual tries to escape from the clutches of human hands. She wants to do away with Raka who wants to come to the hill country to recuperate in Kasauli. Because everyone she meets tells her to go to Kasauli, where nature works more than the medicines do, but her grandmother Nanda Kaul doesn't have positive attitudes on her arrival. The depiction of characters suggests certain situations in their lives and the typical images as nature has its relationship towards living organisms. The novel employs trajectories of life and externalizes multidimensional forms of living. These images have been employed to examine human relationships and their significance. The untrodden path taken by Nanda may not be highly appreciated but she is weighed down by the modern predicaments. She is quite sure that she has completed her duty in life and takes a decision to “be left to the pines and cicadas alone she hoped she would not stop” (3). She is well tuned with the place and landscape around her. “Everything she wanted was here, at Carignano, in Kasauli. Here, on the ridge of the mountain, in this quiet house” (3). Due to the passage of time she enters in the world of old age. She embodies a tree out there to bear the unpredictable seasonal difference of life. “Whatever else came, or happened here, would be an unwelcome intrusion and distraction”(3). She is grey, tall and thin and she fancies “she could merge with the pine trees and could be mistaken for one. To be a tree, no more and no less, was all she was prepared to undertake”(4). As Indira says, “Nanda’s sense of identification with the pine trees suggests her desire for absolute stillness and withdrawal from life. They may even be an unconscious death- wish in desiring to become a tree”. (Anita Desai as an Artist 97) Nanda is attracted to Carignano for ‘its barrenness that equalizes her. The lonely house is symbolic of the solitary life of Nanda.

Dryness of life has engulfed her and thus, she is absolutely against social life which is essential aspect of living human condition. The barrenness and starkness associated with it symbolizes the essential human condition alienation. Anita Desai has correctly brought out the sight of an eagle or a bright hope served to delight her otherwise solitary existence. Ecocriticism evolves not only through the ecological concerns but through description of landscape and imagination of nature and climatic intervention. It draws a meaningful link between animate and inanimate relationships.

As Anita Desai writes: I kept animals, too, you know, for my children, remembering how much I'd enjoyed having them as a child, she plunged in recklessly. Not only dogs and cats but unusual ones too, Monkeys. We had a pair of monkeys that we kept chained to the veranda rails because they were too destructive to let loose. They were gibbons-long-limbed, black-faced and silvery, like langurs, such fun (99).

Nanda was concerned with the present life she was leading and suddenly she encountered the arrival of Raka has turned her face gloomy and dejected. She was immensely triggered and felt something is disturbing and burning in her inner self. Here the author portrays, Raka as a symbol of fire. And Nanda is a symbol of forest. Ironically she wants to say that Nannda's life has become the hell by the presence of Raka. She was her own granddaughter but she dealt with her as a distant relative or a stranger, who is not appreciated from Nanda's part as Desai says: "To Nanda Kaul she was still an intruder, an outsider, a mosquito flown up from the plain to tease and worry". (40) Raka wondered at the different sites of Carignano, and peeped through the windows, one day she saw tin sheds and cooked houses built on bricks and concrete walls, looked like a factory. Later on she remembered and puzzled at the scenic beauties as Desai says:

Her father and grandmother had extolled the beauties and delights of a Himalaya hill-station to her, but said nothing of factories. Here was such an enormous one that Raka wondered at their ignorance of it. To her, it seemed to dominate the landscape-a square dragon, boxed, bricked and stoked. (42)

Raka has come here to recuperate from her sickness and to explore the natural beauty of Carignano, but Nanda is doesn't appreciate, when she sees her granddaughter wondering around in the jungle “as if she were a thousand black mosquitoes, a stillly humming conglomerate of them and did not know whether to contain or release this dire seething” (45). Nanda was surprised to discover that child has a gift of disappearance suddenly and silently for hours, sometimes she was seen in the midst of stony hills, “wondering down a lane in a slow, straying manner, stopping to strip a thorny bush of its few berries or to examine an insect under a leaf” (46). She was not a part of Nanda Kaul, now but she has discovered her own place to stay in it.

One fine day when the sun was in the sky “babbling in and out of the dust clouds, lighting them up in a great conflagration- a splendid bone that burnt in the heart of yellow clouds. The whole world was livid, inflamed” (53). Raka was surprised to see flames erupting from the distant clouds and enquired whether “will it set the hill on fire” (53). Ram Lal in reply says:

This is how forest fires starts. I can tell you how many forest fires we can see each year in Kasauli. Some have come up as far as our Riling. You can see how many of the trees are burnt, and houses too. Once the house down the hill, South View, was burnt to the ground before the fire engine arrived (53).

Ila Das's rape in Desai's novel is mercilessly carried out in the darkness of the fields that are supposed to sustain life. The atrocities that the women suffer in Desai's novel find their culmination in Raka who sets the forest on fire in the end. Anita Desai has clearly mentioned the efficacy of forest fire which leads to ecological imbalance; consequently human beings become the tragic victims. Here what we notice is that the ecological concerns and man- nature interface have been clearly reflected. Mountain is the symbol of Nanda Kaul and Raka represents wild nature. She is very silent and very swift like a forest fire. Forest fire is main concern for the mountain regions, especially in summer. Sometimes it is accidental and sometimes it is deliberately burn the forest for forest cultivation or shifting cultivation of tribal folk which causes massive loss of life and property and degradation of natural resources. Raka was imagining the natural catastrophe "she thought she heard the cries of animals and birds burning in that fire" (75). The expedition of nature has invigorated the drooping spirit of Raka to enjoy the natural sites of Carignano.

Desai's novel is a blend of nature and characters and she has written her novel in unique manner that they represent their own individuality. Man has turned into machine now because it depends largely on modern technology, and uses natural resources to satisfy his desire. In Carignano once upon a time garden house was the most beautiful garden in Kasauli, now it has been used as an army camp. It clearly depicts the insensitivity of man to towards nature and patriarchal attitude in destroying the natural phenomena. Literally man has exploited nature like an object for his own pleasure. Here Anita Desai wants us to draw the attention of the degradation of the ecological balance. She depicts the aesthetic experiences drawn from the nature and that makes the human beings live in peace and harmony regardless of our pathetic life in the world. In fact Anita Desai has incorporated environmental attitudes in her novels,

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which speak about animate and inanimate things that surround the entire natural ecosystem.

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